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St. Alphonse: The Birgu painting of St. Alphonse Maria de Liguori after restoration.

The Birgu Painting of St Alphonse Maria De Liguori

A Journey in the History of Popular Religion in Malta

Simon Mercieca is led by the restoration of a painting depicting St. Alphonse Maria De Liguori to examine the birth of the cult in Malta and the impact that his works had in Malta in particular on the cult of the Immaculate Conception and that of Jesus the Redeemer.

The Legacy of a New Devotion

A historic painting depicting Sr Alphonse Maria de Liguori (1696-1787), which is venerated at the Parish church of Sr Laurence at Vittoriosa, has been recently restored after having sustained considerable damage over the years. In fact, it badly needed to be relined and cleaned. Owing to an accumulation of dirt, candle wax and layers of varnish applied over the years, only a dull, matt image remained visible to the naked eye. Furthermore, the aerial bombardment of 1941, when the church was badly shaken, must have left its mark on this religious icon. The canvas was even “hashed-in” at the lower middle part, whilst part of the upper edge was perforated. The punctured area was fixed at the back by a piece of paper glued onto the canvas in an attempt to hold the torn tissue to the rest of the picture.

The painting was obtained in the middle of the 19th century. It was the personal property of a Vittoriosa resident, Giuseppe Bonnici, who kept it at his home for his personal devotion. Bonnici decided to hand this painting over to the parish church of Birgu, accompanied by a deed of Foundation and in 1862

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he sought the permission of the local Bishop Gaetano Pace Forno (1857-74) to have his Foundation formally approved, including saying Mass on the Saint's feast day. In his reply, dated 29 July 1862, the Bishop approved the Foundation and appointed Bonnici as the procurator, responsible for the organisation of religious celebrations.¹ In the meantime, Bonnici had agreed with the members of the Confraternity of Saint Catherine to install the painting on the altar dedicated to their patron saint, beneath Mattia Preti's painting which adorns this chapel. Indeed its vivid colours and pious expressiveness attracted much devotion to the extent that ten days later, and without warning, members of the Confraternity of Saint Catherine removed the painting, relegating it to a corner in the sacristy. Bonnici's reaction was to ask members of another Confraternity, that of St. Joseph, to accept and have this picture installed on the altar dedicated to their Saint, which was situated in the same transept as the altar of St. Catherine. After what Bonnici described as his 'incessanti preghiere', the members of the Confraternity accepted his proposal.

However, this new arrangement was to be short-lived. In 1864, the members of the Confraternity of St. Joseph began putting pressure on Bonnici to have the painting removed from the altar. They began to impose new conditions, such as the donation of money to their Confraternity, and that the painting be temporarily removed from the altar during the feast of their Patron Saint. Should Bonnici be unwilling to accept these new conditions, the Confraternity insisted on having the painting removed altogether from their altar.

Bonnici reacted by writing to the Curia requesting the Bishop to intervene and to prohibit the removal of the painting from the chapel of Saint Joseph. Bonnici's request was granted, but at the same time, the Curia officials sought not to offend the Confraternity of St. Joseph.² The result was a solomonic decision. The painting was to be kept within the precincts of this chapel but it was transferred

from the altar onto the right-hand pillar. This new positioning became permanent for it is still there up to the present day.

It should be stated that the complaints raised by the members of the Confraternity had a sound basis as, prior to its restoration and cleaning, the painting bore an excessive accumulation of smoke, stains of wax and soot on its surface.

In 1931, Canon Giuseppe Cassar from Vittotiosa bequeathed money for the setting up of another pious foundation by which he elevated the Low Mass celebrated in August for St. Alphonse to a High Mass.³ The war did not wipe out the devotion towards this particular saint but it was probably increased when the parish priest at the time, Canon Paolo Galea, took the decision to have the painting repaired and the punctured part glued at the back whilst a new silver frame was made, replacing an older wooden mount.

A Biographical Note

St Alphonse belonged to one of the new religious orders that emerged in Italy to counteract Lutheranism and eventual Protestant beliefs. He was born in Naples in 1696 into a noble family, who helped him fulfil his desire to found a new religious order, that of the ⁶Redemptorists. He died in 1787 and was canonised in 1839.

He inspired and successfully kindled popular piety, his preferred medium of communication being the published word. Through his writings, he spread devotion to the Virgin Mary and promoted the cult of the Immaculate Conception. In fact, Cotronea's devotion to this particular Saint should be linked to the spreading of this cult during the eighteenth and, in particular, the nineteenth century, when it gained a strong foothold in all the three parishes of the town.

The person who actually introduced devotion to Alphonse in Malta was Bishop Fra. Vincenzo Labini who presided over the Maltese diocese between 1780 and 1807.

Statue of Christ
the Redeemer,
Senglea.



The fact that Alphonse was declared a saint in 1839 does not in any way preclude the fact that the painting arrived in the parish church of Birgu before his canonisation. It has been claimed that Labini was an intimate friend of St. Alphonse⁴ who died seven years after Labini became Bishop of Malta. Liguori's reputation is based on his saintliness during his lifetime and Labini promoted his friend as a model of spirituality by encouraging the people's veneration.

Labini, like St. Alphonse, hailed from the Neapolitan province of Bitonto in Puglia and was born into a noble family. More importantly, he was a member of a religious order which was very similar to the one founded by St. Alphonse: the Theatine Order founded by St. Gaetan.⁵ Taking into consideration the age of St. Alphonse and that of Bishop Labini, and also the fact that the latter, for a long period in his young days, lived in Naples, in all probability Labini came to know Alphonse personally or at least had first-hand knowledge of the founding-father of the Redemptorist Order.

Cult Impact on Cottonera

This new veneration had an immediate effect on the population of the area. Birgu was not to be the only church to be endowed with a portrait of the Saint. The parish church of Bormla received a similar donation. This painting is now preserved in the sacristy there.

The oil painting of St. Alphonse at Bormla's parish church should be linked to the spreading of devotion to the Immaculate Conception in the area. It was through Bishop Alpheran De Bussan's direct intervention and on his insistence that the titular was changed from that of the Virgin Mary under the title of An Aid in Oblivion to the present title on 8 June 1732.⁶ One should remember that St. Alphonse had written a number of devotional works to spread the veneration of the relatively new cult of the Immaculate Conception.

In fact, unlike what may perhaps be thought today, the cult of the Immaculate Conception was not restricted to Cospicua but was strongly present in all the parishes of the Cottonera area and also present in the surrounding villages. Like in Cospicua, both Vittoriosa and Senglea had a confraternity dedicated to the Immaculate Conception.

In Cospicua too, the parish community ordered a new statue toward the end of the eighteenth century, and this statue would be totally renovated and redone anew to the present format at the turn of the previous century. All this shows the impact that Alphonse Maria de Ligouri's teaching and propagation of this cult was having on the whole area of the Easter harbour district.

To the cult of St. Alphonse should also be attributed the responsibility for the diffusion of another religious cult, that of the devotion towards the Sacred Heart of Jesus. This cult set deep roots in all the parishes of the harbour area and then spread to all over the island. The inhabitants of the harbour towns would soon begin to express their devotion to this saint. People from all over began to name their offspring after St. Alphonse. Alphonse, Alphonse Maria, Fonzu, and even the female equivalent Fonza were popular names that parents gave their children at the baptismal font up to a few decades ago.

There was a trend then, still alive today, that portraits of persons reputed to have lived a saintly life were executed before the person was actually declared a saint. The diffusion of the candidate's iconography, through oil paintings or printed matter by members of religious orders who aspired to have their founding-father declared saint, was quite the norm. This painting seems to have fitted the bill. In fact, the painting lacks the traditional halo normally associated with religious iconography of saints. One is therefore led to conclude that it was commissioned before the actual declaration of Alphonse as Saint.

The style chosen for St. Alphonse was similar to the one adopted before, in the late 16th and early 17th century, to

depict the image of Carlo Borromeo. There are similarities between the two. Both were men of letters, both were bishops (eventually Borromeo was also made a cardinal) and both had the counter-reformation movement at heart. The Birgu picture of St. Alphonse follows the established and most common representation of this man's image of an old man with his head bent and contorted over his right shoulder in meditation while physically embracing the image of a crucified Christ. Such physical contortion was the result of severe punishment that the saint inflicted on his body, and in the late medieval spirit, he tied his hand to his neck while setting himself in a position of embracing a crucifix.

The New Cult of the Redeemer

It should also be noted that St. Alphonse's influence on popular pious devotion in Cottonera was not only limited to the cult of the Virgin Mary but extended to the celebration of Passiontide. The Redemptorist movement, which he had set in motion, would influence and indirectly foster this new devotion and the Cottonera area would be one of the first to introduce this new cult of devotion to Jesus under the title of the Redeemer (or *Ir-Redentur*). All the major churches in the area (not only the parish churches but also other major institutions such as the church of Saint Philip in Senglea, and that of the Dominicans in Birgu) sought to own a statue of the Redeemer. This new devotion would slowly spread all over the island, which in Malta is now very much associated with the local religious customs and popular followers of the Passiontide celebrations.

While the statue which is today associated with the image of *Ir-Redentur* or "Jesus Christ the Redeemer", has a relatively old history, this religious iconography was mostly associated with those Stations of the Cross depicting Christ being given and forced to carry the Cross. In fact, in various parishes this image is still known as *L-Imghobbi* (Christ Laden with the Cross) rather than the "Redeemer". On the

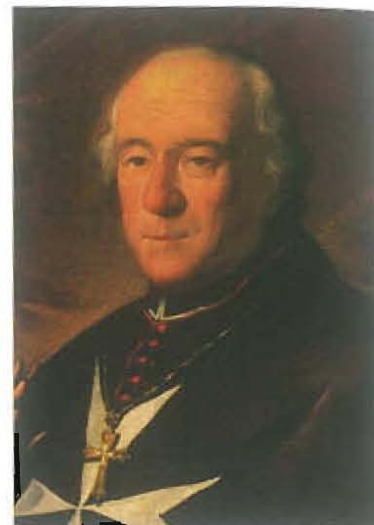
impetus of St. Alphonse's teaching, this image began to be associated first of all in Cottonera with the latter image. The first to promote this new cult was Senglea, after a new statue of Christ on hands and knees crushed by the weight of the Cross was ordered for their series of statues for the Good Friday procession.

In 1762, for example, the local Bishop Rull bestowed indulgences on whoever recited the Creed in front of it. This statue became famous for the healing powers which were attributed to it after it was held that through its intercession Senglea was delivered from the plague that hit Malta in 1813. Senglea was the only town not to be affected. Soon, processions began to be held with this statue, independently from the regular procession of Good Friday. Fortunato Panzavecchia recorded these processions with this new statue and also lists the itinerary of the procession.

Soon the other neighbouring parishes followed. The parish of Cospicua had a statue of the Redeemer made of papier-mâché around the same period when the Senglea one was commissioned. Then, in 1858, the sculptor, Pietro Paolo Azzopardi was commissioned to produce a wooden statue, the innovation being that it had to have the same posture as that of Senglea. In the contract for the execution of this statue, it was stipulated that the sculptor was to make a copy of Senglea's Redeemer.⁷ Birgu too would also change its older statue, figuring the image of a standing Christ carrying the Cross by another that was also modelled on this new concept of the redeeming Christ – the figure of Christ who has fallen under the weight of the Cross. The new statue is the work of Carlo Darmanin and was finished in 1865.⁸

The cult soon began to spread further into the countryside. When Cospicua got a new statue of Christ the Redeemer, the older one was passed on to the distant rural village of Mellicha. In the area between Hal Għaxaq and Hal Tarxien, a small church was built in 1852 in honour

Bishop Labini. Portrait painting found at the Wignacourt Museum Rabat.



of Christ the Redeemer. However, the devotion towards *il Santo Cristo* or the Redeemer had a much longer history that went back to 1766, following a sermon on the passion of Christ delivered by a Capuchin friar. In brief, when St. Alphonse was writing and publishing on the theological virtues of Christ Redeemer for popular consumption, in Malta, his religious appeal was gaining ground amongst the faithful through other religious orders.⁹

The Cleaning Process

The primary importance of this Birgu painting of Saint Alphonse is its vernacular relevance, as it was an expression of new pious devotions that developed in Malta along the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Technically it is not a great work even if the cleaning process enhanced its aesthetic value by revealing the rich texture and colour of this painting as well as the artist's intention of producing an image aimed to stimulate popular piety. Restoration began by removing the layers of varnish that coated the canvas. Furthermore, at some point the painting seems to have had its old wooden frame painted with gold-leaf (known in Malta as *porporina*) giving it a fake cheap look. The "gold" was applied on the frame without taking the precaution of removing the canvas first with the result that some brush strokes of paint smeared the edges of the painting.

Cleaning of layers of smoke and grime has revealed long-hidden features and restored the vivid white, red and velvet hues as well as exposing the intricate design of the lace motifs in the work. Furthermore, background scenery was revealed evoking Naples, Vesuvius and its surrounding countryside. Vesuvius is presented as an active volcano, emitting white-greyish smoke. The angle chosen is that which can still be viewed by travellers today on entering the Gulf of Naples when approaching the city by boat. This feature was meant indicate St Alphonse's origins in Naples

There is a second reason, however, why the artist has highlighted Naples. Identifying St. Alphonse with the

Kingdom of Naples is also a reminder of the fact that it was here that he founded the *Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer* (or as the congregation is now known, the *Liguorians* or *Redemptorists*) at Scala, Italy in 1732. An important step forward in St. Alphonse's ecclesiastical career occurred in 1762, when he was appointed Bishop of Saint Agata dei Goti by Pope Clement XIII.

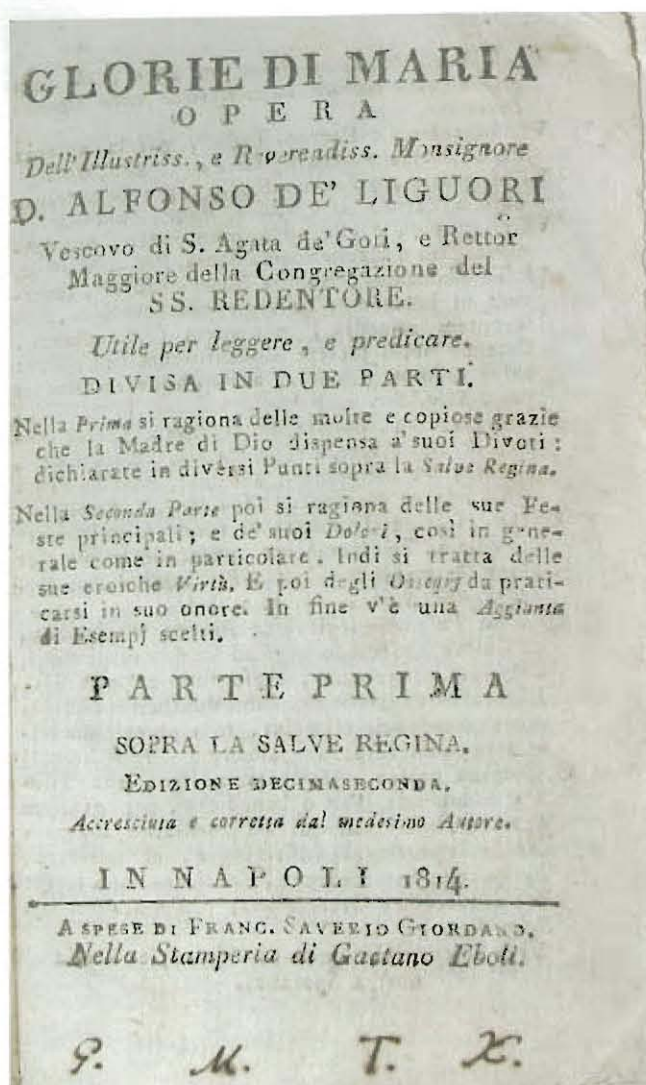
This ecclesiastical appointment is clearly depicted in this painting for the Saint is represented as a bishop, wearing his Episcopal vestments including a rich velvet coloured overcoat or ecclesiastical cape (*mozetta*), his personal seal in the form of a jewelled ring, and the pectoral cross encrusted in gems. Through cleaning another detail has been exposed: St Alphonse's tonsured crown - that long-standing passage of rite for persons entering the priesthood.

Furthermore, cleaning revealed that the crucifix held by St. Alphonse, which prior to cleaning appeared to be black, was in fact, silver, as was fashionable amongst the clergy during the 18th and 19th centuries. Cleaning also revealed the real colour of the bishop's cape. It was painted in a shining purple colour, with a vivid red border which the artist obtained by mixing different colours. In fact, this particular colour was obtained by using Prussian blue mixed with rose madder.

During restoration, the decision was taken not to over clean the picture. As a precautionary measure it was thought advisable to clean less in order not to remove shades and shadows applied either by the artist or by later additions or interventions. Furthermore, any repair intervention carried out to the damaged parts as well as the relining process are all reversible.

The Painting Texture

This painting is neither a local artwork nor a great work of art. It is a modest piece intended to stimulate popular devotion. Nonetheless it contains interesting features, such as the way the painter defines the intricate lace patterns



The first page of the 1814 edition of St. Alphonse's work "Glorie di Maria"

of St. Alphonse's religious vestments. The vividness of the colours point to foreign artistry. The painter was either strongly influenced by Flemish art or was of Flemish origins or Flemish trained. This conclusion is not based on the fact that, at this point in time, Malta did not have artists who could reach such artistic levels, but because of the lack of local resources local creations were restricted in the gamma of colours. The absence of certain types of ochre, in particular the lack of yellow ochre in this painting, implies that this was not locally produced. Local paintings tended to abound in the use of yellow ochre, which was one of those colours available in Malta. Minor local artists sought to avoid making use of certain vivid colours to keep the costs low.

Most probably Bonnici brought it over to Malta after acquiring it abroad. The internal frame holding the canvas seems to be of a foreign make, having wooden brackets that exercise pressure on the wooden frame to strengthen the canvas. These are known in Maltese as *infilsaturi*. Once the wooden joints slackened due to change in the outside temperature, these wooden slides could be pressed to redress the lost pressure. Most probably it had a new mount which

was at some point painted over in gold. The supporting outer frame was either found not strong enough to support the picture, or else was considered of inferior quality and a new silver frame mount was commissioned.

The painting is an eloquent piece of work, composed of fine brush strokes. In certain areas, the artist applied the technique known as *velatura*, consisting of light oil colours mixed with matt varnish to create a shaded section. The end result was the creation of a rich and smooth texture which could deceive even the trained eye of the expert. It was no rare instance that, when judgement was passed, this picture was deemed not an oil painting but simply a coloured print or oleograph glued onto canvas!

The author of this study résumé coordinated the restoration work on this painting. Restoration was carried out by Mr. Joseph Muscat. I would like to thank Mr. Lorenzo Zahra and Fr. Joe Caruana, parish priest of Birgu, for pointing out important historical documents related to the history of this painting. The photographs for this article have been taken by Brinn Buhagiar, all rights reserved.

Notes

- 1 A.A.M. Atti Civili, 1862, f. 433r.
- 2 A.A.M. Supplice 1864, ff. 271r-v.
- 3 Parish Archives Birgu, Chapter Minutes, 13 march 1931, p. .
- 4 J. Grech Cremona, "Archbishop Vincenzo Labini", *The Sunday Times*, April 29, 2007, p. 17.
- 5 A. Zammit Gabareta, 'The Nomination of Vincenzo Labini to the See of Malta', *Melita Historica*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1961, pp. 24-30.
- 6 A.A.M. *Visitatio Pastoralis*, Vol. 33, f. 1104. The old church of Cospicua was pulled down and constructed anew in the beginning of the 18th century. The major construction works were finished by 1732. In that year, on 25 May 1732, the new church was consecrated. Then, the current Bishop Alpheran De Bussan wanted this new temple to be dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. The new dedication was officially sanctioned by the Bishop on 8 June 1732.
- 7 C. Galea Scannura, *Holy Week at Cospicua, Malta*, 1998, p. 38.
- 8 L. Zahra, 'Fil-Birgu', in *Il-Purċissjonijiet tal-Gimgha l-Kbira f'Malta u Għawdex*, Pietà 1992, p. 43.
- 9 A. Vella, 'L-Istorja Ekklesjastika ta' Hal Għaxaq'. In *Hal Għaxaq u Niesu*, ed. H.C.R. Vella, Għaxaq 2006, pp. 99-103.